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# **Urban Violence in War and Peace: Lebanon's Reconstruction**

Deen Sharp

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[geog.comms@lse.ac.uk](mailto:geog.comms@lse.ac.uk)

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# Urban Violence in War and Peace: Lebanon's Reconstruction

Deen Sharp, Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, d.s.sharp@lse.ac.uk

## Abstract

In Lebanon, there has been a furious and continuing debate over how the reconstruction, with the urban development corporation *Solidere* at its core, has been undertaken. In the course of the 2019 protests—what many Lebanese are calling a revolution—and the economic implosion in 2020, the Solidere project that led the national reconstruction process continues to occupy a central place of contestation in the nation. For many in the country, the reconstruction that ostensibly followed the Ta'if Peace Accord has left its own scars of violence and dispossession on the country's inhabitants. This paper reconceptualises the idea of reconstruction as something that happens in the aftermath of conflict. It traces how the construction of the built environment can also be part of conflict. In so doing, this essay illuminates how in Lebanon the reconstruction process was embedded within the dynamics of the Civil War and one that also exceeds it. The reconstruction was not a process that emerged in the aftermath of the conflict but fully embedded within it. Lebanon's reconstruction involved the consolidation of social power by a narrow elite and urban violence in both periods of open conflict and peace.

## Keywords

Reconstruction, Lebanon, Beirut, Solidere, urban violence.

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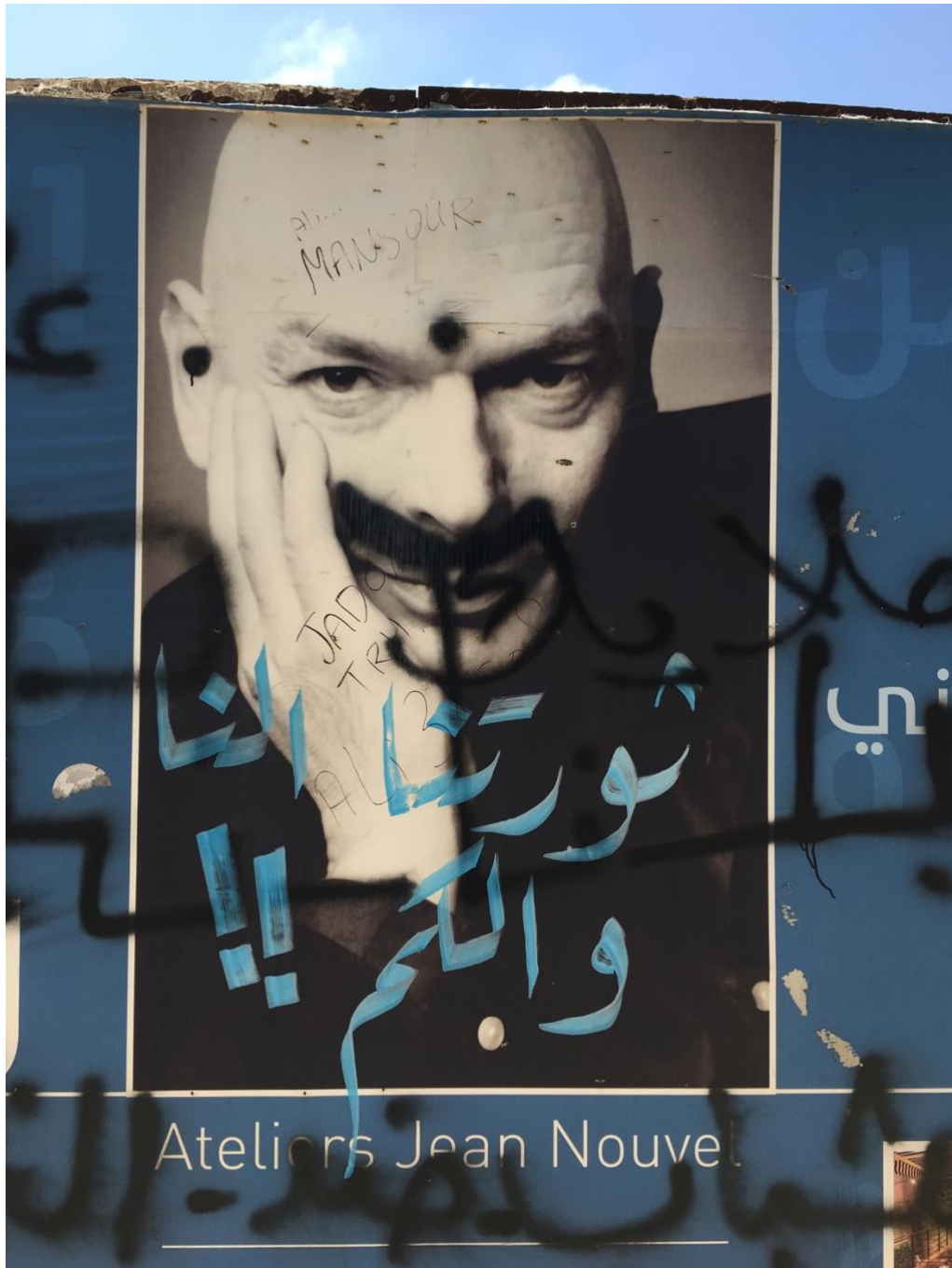


Figure 1: Jean Nouvel in Beirut. The graffiti reads, “Our revolution, for us and for all of you.”  
Photograph by the author, 2016.

## 1. Introduction

On a hellishly hot Sunday, in July 2016, I waited on a narrow strip of pavement alongside the George Haddad Highway in front of the French bakery-chain, *Paul*. The highway links to the Fouad Chehab Ring Road, forming part of an open-trench road that encircles the Beirut Central District (BCD). Since 1994, this trench has delineated the territory of the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District S.A.L. (in French, SOLIDERE: *SO*ciété *LI*banaise *DE RE*construction). Solidere is the centrepiece for the national reconstruction project that followed the end of the Civil War (1975-1990) in Lebanon. Constructing this infrastructural trench around the BCD was one of the first tasks that Solidere's sponsors undertook. At the time of its inauguration, Solidere was one of the largest single inner-city and waterfront renewal projects in the world. It turned the whole of the BCD—1.8 million square meters and an additional 608,000 square meters of reclaimed land on the sea front—into a corporation.

*Paul* was the meeting point for the tour “‘Beauty under Stress’, practicing public space in Beirut Central District”, organised and guided by Rania Sassine, an architectural consultant, lecturer and former employee of Solidere International, under the auspices of The Arab Center for Architecture.<sup>1</sup> At 10 AM sharp, the tour began by effortlessly crossing the George Haddad highway made possible because of the sparse Sunday traffic. Crossing the highway on a weekday is a dangerous proposition and entering the downtown area—now also known as Solidere—by foot is no easy task. Rania Sassine later told me that “I started, if you noticed, by crossing the highway... to highlight one of the wrong design decisions of Solidere, to cut out the rest of the city”.<sup>2</sup> Sassine added, “I always call Solidere, paradise in a box”.

<sup>1</sup> Sassine is an architect and the former head of the Master Planning Unit at Solidere International. This was the third tour that Sassine was doing of downtown Beirut that was undertaken through her own initiative.

<sup>2</sup> Sassine, Rania. Senior Lecturer at ALBA and former employee of Solidere International. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 13, 2016.



Figure 2: Solidere. Photograph by author, 2013.



Solidere has facilitated the construction of a high-quality rebuilt urban fabric in the BCD that includes its own electricity and fibre-optic network and a tunnel that connects this area straight to the airport highway. It features buildings designed by some of the world's most prominent architects, including Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel and Steven Holl. This exclusive, physically connected and high-end urban core, with its pristine but empty streets, now stands in stark contrast to the rest of Beirut and urban Lebanon more broadly. Outside of the paradise of the Solidere box, lies a corroding and collapsing urban landscape. Electricity cuts and water shortages are constant, a garbage crisis has left rotting rubbish along the streets and created open dumps, public space has been privatised, building regulations are widely ignored, architectural heritage has been replaced with rapidly constructed buildings and traffic has ground to a halt.

In 2020, the deprivation of urban social life in Lebanon reached new lows as the economy collapsed. The government in March failed to repay a \$1.2 billion bond, its first ever sovereign default. The country now faces not only unprecedented electricity shortages, but a rapid rise in poverty and the prospect of famine - inflation has resulted in the price of basic foods increasing 55 percent. Commentators in Lebanon are comparing the current period to the darkest days of the Civil War and the 1915-1918 famine. As the economist Zafiris Tzannatos (2020) outlines, how Lebanon found itself in such dire straits has long been evident. Budget deficits have averaged more than 11 percent since 1999 that produced a debt-to-GDP ratio of over 150 percent in 2019 that has since increased by another eight percent (from \$85 billion to \$92 billion) (Tzannatos 2020). The new state architecture of the Second Lebanese Republic that was established following the official end of the Civil War and was followed by the launch of the Solidere-led national reconstruction is at the core of this national economic implosion.

At the start of the new millennium, a scholarship began to accumulate on how the Solidere-led reconstruction far from assisting in the economic development of Lebanon was instead at the heart of the spiralling levels of national debt, and contributing significantly to the state's fiscal crisis, corruption and social inequality (See for example: Baroudi 2002; Becherer 2005, 2016; Dibeh 2005; Gaspard 2004; Hourani 2005; Leenders 2004; Makarem 2014; Najem 2000; Sakr-Tierney 2017). Solidere was understood to be at the intersection of an intricate set of flows of financial rents created through compensation, Treasury Bills, high interest rates, tax avoidance and real estate speculation. The project scholars argued is as a prime example of "actually existing neoliberal urbanization" (Baumann 2017; Hourani 2005; Krijnen and Fawaz 2008; Makaren 2014). This literature showed Solidere to be a strong illustration of how city



space is mobilised through neoliberal urban policies as an arena for both market-orientated economic growth and elite consumption practices (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

The idea that Solidere has contributed to the current “de-development”, to use Sara Roy’s (1995) term, of Lebanon is well established in the scholarship. In this paper, I trace the historical geographical processes of this de-development to disrupt the understanding more broadly that reconstruction should be automatically assumed as something that should be tied to peace and development – rebuilding can cause further cycles of violence. My contribution builds on and adds to the work that has sought to illuminate how the reconstructions that have been undertaken in Lebanon have continued certain forms of urban violence, conflict and destruction in times of war and peace rather than alleviated it (Verdeil 2001; Nasr and Verdeil 2008; Ghandour and Fawaz 2010).

The reconstruction of the BCD that began following the halt to active fighting in 1991, I contend, cannot be comprehended independently from the previous rebuilding efforts, most significantly those that started in 1977 and 1983. I reframe the normative temporal horizon of the reconstruction, to be understood as part of the dynamics of conflict rather than separate from it, by showing how the Solidere project in the BCD is rooted in the multiple attempts to rebuild in the various phases of the Civil War. The reconstruction, I contend, was never aimed at rebuilding a social contract or establishing a post-conflict era; rather it was part of an urban geopolitical project that was aimed at the accumulation of social (territorial, economic, financial, political and symbolic) power and control by one faction over the other in a violent conflict.

This paper adds both to understandings of Lebanon’s reconstruction process and also to the work in Geography and Urban Studies that has illuminated the way in which the built environment can be violent and weaponised and how the construction and organisation of the urban process is in some cases as equally as violent as its destruction (Graham 2004, 2011; Sharp 2016; Weizman 2007). This work has built on the foundational scholarship of the architectural theorist Paul Virilio ([1977] 2006, [1983] 2008) and his focus on the intersection of the modern city, mobility, logistics, violence and war; and his refusal to make a distinction between war and peace. For Virilio ([1983] 2008) the very creation of the city is the result of war or at the very least preparation for it. This examination of how reconstruction can be part of the militarisation of urban space is a contribution to the call by Stephen Graham (2004) to be attentive to the expansion of such processes.

In the context of the built environment the English word “reconstruction” is conventionally understood to be “the act of rebuilding a devastated area in the *aftermath* of

war” (Oxford English Dictionary: 2009). In this use, there is an understanding that reconstruction happens after the act of destruction and conflict – a process that is distinct and separate from violence and warfare. In examining how the reconstruction in Lebanon was embedded within the processes of the Civil War, I intended to draw attention to those scholars thinking about urban violence and conflict in relation to the complexities of reconstruction processes specifically. The scholarship on military urbanism remains small and the dynamics and specificities of reconstruction are even more under studied.

Reconstruction can be, what Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) frame as, a grey zone of violence; where the violence, by definition, is not obvious (22). In so doing, I direct attention to how not only violence can be normalised but also provide further clarity on how wartime and peacetime violence can overlap and blur. Violence is not easily defined and the urban violence considered in this paper, no less so. Violence, following Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004, 22) and their use of Laura Nader’s (1997) idea of “controlling processes”, I understand to encompass all forms of “controlling processes” that assault basic human freedoms and individual or collective survival. I understand urban violence as not only as a physical and material force, but also a controlling process with, *inter alia*, political, financial, cultural and social dimensions that give violence its power and meaning.

This paper draws on archival research in English, Arabic and French, conducted by the author primarily at the American University of Beirut, the Arab Center for Architecture and the Sursock Museum, as well as interviews with architects, scholars, politicians, journalists, former residents of the BCD, and current and former employees from Solidere and its parastatals, over three research trips to Lebanon in 2015, 2016 and 2018. This research also includes archival research at the World Bank in Washington D.C. in 2017 where my research included the use of newly declassified papers from the 1990s era.

## **2. The Construction of War**

The conflict in Lebanon, normatively understood to begin in 1975 and end in 1990, was not a military contest between two hostile groups with clearly demarcated battle lines. Rather, analysts have broadly understood this war as a highly complex and brutal series of violent “events” that consist of four different phases: 1975-1977; 1977-1982; 1982-1983; and 1984-1990. Even within these different phases of the conflict there are further incidents. As Robert Fisk (1990) notes describing the fighting from 1975-1976, these events were “a series of

horrors rather than battles; Black Saturday on the Ring motorway, the Palestinian massacre of Christians in Damour, the Christian massacres of Palestinians at Karantina and Tel al-Za'atar" (78). The multiple overlapping battles of the Lebanese conflict entangled a wide range of actors and spaces, resulting in the death of an estimated 130,000 people.<sup>3</sup>

Little accurate data is available on the impact of the war on the built environment, or the effect of the conflict on many other sectors of Lebanese social life. The government's Department of Statistics did not function during the war years and many records were destroyed. The appraisals by international institutions frequently stressed how difficult it was to gauge what was needed for reconstruction (World Bank 1993). A commonly cited assessment by the United Nations, estimated in 1993 that the damages from the Civil War amounted to US\$25 billion (around US\$42 billion in 2018) in destroyed infrastructure and property alone (ibid.). The World Bank reported in 1991 that 800,000 people, or 160,000 households—almost one quarter of the population—had been displaced and sought shelter in existing dwellings or on state-owned or private land, “in unhealthy and overcrowded conditions” (World Bank 1991). While international organisations tried to assess the amount of destruction that the war had caused, it is integral to stress that the damage was not only undertaken through the destruction of the built environment. Equally integral to warfare was the role of competing militias and how they organised the built environment and delivered basic urban services.

The construction and reformulation of urban space was critical to the conduct of urban conflict. This warfare produced a highly fragmented urban landscape in Lebanon—specifically in Beirut—that has continued to impact urbanisation processes and urban forms to the present day. “I compare Beirut to an extremely crowded room full of people that turn their back to each other, packed with solitary islands; all these buildings are very solitary, they do not communicate with one and other,” the Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury explained.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the war not only were regions and neighbourhoods turned into enclaves, but wooden panels replaced glass windows, steel slats substituted wooden doors, and open streets transformed into fortified compounds.

Several scholars have noted that the Civil War produced a particular urban project in Beirut that killed any prospect of an open and plural city (Yassin 2010; Verdeil 2001). As the Lebanese state's sovereignty receded, militia territories—often associated with sectarian

<sup>3</sup> According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) battle deaths dataset volume 3 the Lebanese civil war resulted in a total of 131,104 deaths.

<sup>4</sup> Khoury, Bernard. Principal DW5 Architects. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 11, 2016.

identities—proliferated. War and violence transformed Beirut into an enclaved city. The urban question was integral for militias who wanted to shift rural communities into the city to facilitate the creation of a religiously homogenous socio-geographical space (Yahya 1995, 110). The historian Fawwaz Tarabulsi describes this process writing that, “when the militias finally ‘cleansed’ their territories and came to control ‘their own people’ and run their affairs, pressure on the individual to define himself/herself in terms of a unique social and cultural sectarian identity reached its climax” (2007, 233).

A voluminous scholarship has been produced, as Joanne Nucho (2017, 6) has detailed, on how networks of urban infrastructures, institutions, and services reproduced particular notions of sectarian belonging and community. The state was no longer the principal provider of basic urban services as it was replaced by numerous sectarian political and religious organisations. Militias used the provision of basic urban services as a strategy to control and intimidate both their “own” population and “others” (Yahya 1995, 107). Michael Davie (1991), for instance, has written on how competing militias wrestled to takeover pumping stations, water towers and distribution valves allowing access to water only to areas under their control and based on their own political goals. A similar process was also undertaken with electricity provision and other basic urban services, including garbage collection, telephone, postal and health services. Hiba Bou Akar (2018) has noted how land and apartment sales, access to housing, as well as zoning, planning regulations and infrastructure projects, have all become entangled in the competing geopolitical territorial contests of various politico-religious organisations.

Importantly for the argument of this paper that focuses on how the reconstruction should be understood as part of the continuation of conflict rather than the establishment of peace, even in the context of large-scale urban destruction during the war years Lebanon continued to urbanise. Khoury stated that, “Beirut did not stop its development during the war years, in fact, development was accelerated by the fact that the centre of the city was voided out... Beirut grew in the absence of any master plan, or any sort of regulating mechanism”.<sup>5</sup> The construction sector was one of the few parts of the economy that continued to grow and develop throughout the years of the conflict. Construction and land parcellation, including the real estate market, were all active in the war years. A World Bank (1991) report notes that before the Civil War, in 1974, construction represented US\$141 million, an estimated 4 percent of national GDP; by 1988 this had grown to US\$328 million, equaling 10 percent of GDP (3).

<sup>5</sup> Khoury, Bernard. Principal DW5 Architects. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. July 11, 2016.

Beyond the construction that created sectarian enclaves and the new housing required for those displaced by the war, the absence of government supervision meant that developers were keen to exploit land beyond permitted or appropriate legal restrictions (Eddé 1997, 116). The Civil War clearly showed that urbanisation, the construction and organisation of the built environment, was part of the conduct of the war. The reconstruction was part of this struggle from the very start of the war, not merely its ostensible conclusion.

### **3. The "Reconstructions" of Beirut: 1977, 1983, and 1991**

The reconstruction process that began following the Ta'if Peace Accord in 1991, and placed Solidere at its centre, was the third significant attempt to rebuild. The Solidere-led reconstruction cannot be understood independently from the multiple previous rebuilding efforts, most significantly those that started in 1977 and 1983. The Solidere project that focused on the reconstruction of downtown Beirut and was the centrepiece for the national reconstruction, for example, did not simply arrive in Lebanon after the Ta'if Peace Accord nor with its inauguration in 1994. The project was the result of intensive, complex and at times violent social struggle. If we understand Solidere, and the reconstruction more broadly, as part of the conflict rather than the peace, it becomes easier to understand why it was through the process of reconstruction and periods of "peace" that much of downtown Beirut was destroyed. It was through efforts of reconstruction that parallel "super" ministries, like the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), were established and able to circumvent parliamentary accountability. Finally, it was through the reconstruction—and notably at the urban scale or even more specifically the scale of the Beirut Central District—that competing geopolitical powers could divide power between each other but also insert new political players into the violent and fractured Lebanese political scene, like the Saudi-Lebanese billionaire Rafik Hariri.<sup>6</sup> It also allowed a narrow elite, as has been detailed in the literature to enrich themselves.

<sup>6</sup> The Ta'if Accord or Agreement was a Saudi-Syrian agreement, overseen by the United States, that placed Lebanon firmly under Syrian occupation but halted the 15 years of open conflict. Scholars are broadly agreed that the deal constructed around the Accord was that Syria would allow Rafik Hariri to lead the economy and reconstruction process, while the Syrians remained in control of security and foreign-policy posts. Solidere is viewed by several Lebanon analysts as part of the Ta'if package, in which Hariri and the Solidere project was seen as central to the United States and Saudi Arabia allowing and even facilitating Syrian military hegemony in Lebanon via the Accord.

Who controlled the reconstruction process and how it was undertaken was of immense sociopolitical and economic importance to factions both within and outside Lebanon. The choices, means and methods by which particular infrastructure, housing, government and financial institutions were reconstituted was of great significance. This is evident in the intense internal wrangling between Lebanese factions over the political, institutional and spatial formulation of the reconstruction plans, examined below.

Although these reconstruction plans aimed to revitalise Lebanon as a whole, they consistently focused on the BCD, which had taken on contradictory roles during the Civil War. On the one hand, its position as the metropolitan and commercial centre of the nation was reduced due to the decentralisation that occurred as various political-sectarian groups created their own respective centre, such as Jounieh in the north and Saida in the south. On the other hand, rival militias viewed the BCD as crucial both tactically and symbolically and it remained a central site of conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Lebanese elites formulated a number of plans to rebuild the BCD throughout different episodes of the war and in so doing emphasise the importance of this area to the formation of social power within the country. Indeed, over the course of the Civil War, three series of distinct (but overlapping) master plans for the downtown area of Beirut were formulated.<sup>8</sup> The first series (1977-1986) was centred around the 1977 plan that French organisation *l'Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme* (APUR) made with the newly established Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR). The second series of plans (1983-1991) is notable for the involvement of Rafik Hariri's corporation, "Oger Liban," and the realisation by many in Lebanon that the intensification of conflict meant that a larger rebuilding plan was warranted in the downtown area. Finally, the third series (1991-1994) produced intense public debate as Lebanon entered the so-called postwar period and the nation shifted its focus from the war to the reconstruction. In the next section, I investigate each of these plans emphasising their significance for the formation of what would eventually result in the Solidere project.

### **3.1 L'Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR) plan, 1977**

<sup>7</sup> It was during the two-year war, known as the battle of the hotels (*ma'arakat al-fanadiq*), in downtown Beirut that the infamous Confrontational Lines (*khutut at tammās*), or the "Green Line", were created.

<sup>8</sup> There is considerable confusion in the literature concerning the different master plans due to the negotiated approach to planning in Beirut, the existence of competing plans, the lack of clear dates on the plans, and many different names each plan had.

The Lebanese government's first full attempt to start the reconstruction process occurred in 1977, two years into the fifteen-year Civil War. In December 1976, then-President Sarkis had installed his banker friend, Salim al-Hoss, as Prime Minister and established a "technocratic" government. As is often the case, Sarkis-Hoss' technocratic government made profound political changes through its attempts of reconstruction that had a deep effect on the form and content of the Lebanese government and state, as well as setting the foundations for Solidere. It was in this initial attempt at reconstruction that a ministry was created that was able to circumvent parliamentary accountability and when the idea for real estate companies to be formed to assist in the reconstruction effectively laying the foundations for the joint-stock corporation, Solidere.

The Sarkis-Hoss government quickly started to formulate plans for the reconstruction, as hopes began to solidify that the fighting had stopped. They created the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) that had notable consequences for how the reconstruction was undertaken and how Solidere was formed in 1991. The Sarkis-Hoss government gave the CDR the authority to bypass parliament and it acquired financial and administrative independence, reporting directly to the Council of Ministers. Through a complex institutional arrangement the CDR was even able to bypass the Council of Ministers receiving sweeping powers for planning, financing, implementing and monitoring the reconstruction process. This included powers normally associated with: the Finance Ministry, such as borrowing; line ministries, including project executions; and development banking, like credit programs. In 1977, the CDR began active rebuilding of the Port of Beirut and lent money for reconstruction of housing, industry, hotels and hospitals (World Bank 1991). Due to its institutional structure, the CDR could bypass Parliament and the Council of Ministers to interact directly with the Prime Minister.

These powers that were devolved to the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) were documented by the World Bank, whose officials were critical of the enormous power that the CDR had been given (World Bank 1990). A 1991 World Bank assessment of the CDR urged the Lebanese government to hand back many of the powers that the CDR had accumulated, such as the ability to execute projects, to line-ministries; this did not happen. The formation of the CDR represented a notable transformation of state power in Lebanon that would have profound implications for the formation of Solidere, as noted below, and was a remarkable concentration of power in an increasingly violent context.

The first reconstruction plan for downtown Beirut that President Sarkis announced was the "Beirut Central District Plan of 1977-1986." In 1977, the opposing groups called a cease-



fire and many in Lebanon thought that this marked the beginning of a transition into a postwar period. A reconstruction plan, which included a damage assessment, was carried out by the French organisation l'Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR) in collaboration with the Beirut Municipality. The APUR-led plan of 1977 entailed a damage assessment of the central district of Beirut showing that the most severe destruction (wherein more than 80 percent of an average building was razed) was concentrated in the most economically important part of the city, if not the nation: the northern tip of the downtown area surrounding the port and the souks. Another ring of destruction surrounded this northern tip, with damage estimated to be at 30-50 percent, while the rest of the downtown area had less than 30 percent damage to it. It is this meticulous documentation by APUR of the damage to downtown Beirut that later researchers and activists would seize upon to show how much destruction of this area was done in renewed efforts of "reconstruction" rather than active fighting, as will be detailed below.

APUR envisaged that property owners would largely be responsible for the repairs. Importantly, compared to later plans, the 1977 plan favoured preservation over reconstruction. However, for those areas in downtown Beirut that suffered more extensive damage, namely Ghalgoul and Saifi, the government or private firms would be responsible. Significantly, the plan introduced the concept of several small-scale real estate corporations (*sociétés foncière*) to finance reconstruction in those areas. The shares would be distributed according to previously existing legislation from 1964, which stipulated that real estate owners would hold 75 percent of the shares and the government would hold 25 percent (Kabbani 1990). These partnerships between proprietors, legal tenants and interested investors were based on the principle of exchanging property ownership or tenancy rights for shares in a company, while the monetary capital was provided by investors for similar shares. The provisional laws for the financing of real estate companies would provide the basis for the 1991 law that formed Solidere.

In December 1978, the CDR began to implement the Lebanese Lira (LL) 22 billion (approximately US\$2.5 billion in 2019) national "Reconstruction Project". It consisted of a rehabilitation program for roads and the Port of Beirut, a waste management study, and the rebuilding of housing, industry, hotels and hospitals. The 1978 "Reconstruction Project" was framed around the idea that the private sector was to be the principal generator of productive activity, able to provide basic social services, decentralise the economy away from Beirut and finance the reconstruction mainly from external sources. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon and the escalation in fighting between Christian militias and Syrian forces, stopped these plans. The 1977 APUR plan remained partially in use until 1986 and laid many of the

critical foundations for the subsequent reconstruction plans that would assist in isolating and concentrating power among a narrow elite.

### **3.2 The Oger-Gemeyal plan, 1983**

In 1983, a ceasefire and the appointment of Amin Gemayel as President instigated a new set of reconstruction plans. It was in this period and through the process of urban reconstruction that the Saudi-Lebanese billionaire contractor Rafik Hariri entered the Lebanese scene. This period also witnessed a significant destruction

The 1983 reconstruction plans included a proposal for the redevelopment of the northern littoral between Beirut and Jounieh (the “Linor” project). This was a region where Gemayel wanted to assert his authority due to its strategic importance. During the war, the area had been the site of intense and anarchic development; as a result, Jounieh had established itself as a notable Christian metropole and a competing urban centre away from Beirut (Édde 1997, 105). The Reagan administration strongly supported Gemayel. Reagan had agreed to the enlargement of the multinational force in Lebanon and had taken a more active role in asserting American power in the country. The administration formed the US Businessmen’s Commission on the Reconstruction of Lebanon that issued the report, *The Reconstruction of Lebanon* (1984), outlining opportunities for US enterprises in the rebuilding effort. The author of the report, John Law, notes that in 1983 the US Agency for International Development “was busy helping on a number of infrastructural projects” (131).

This second set of reconstruction plans is notable for the insertion of Hariri into the process. Hariri, who acted in part as a representative for the Saudi King in peace negotiations between Lebanese warring factions, would emerge as the central figure in Lebanese social life following the cessation of active fighting. In 1992, soon after the Civil War had stopped, Hariri was elected Prime Minister, under controversial circumstance. The prominent Lebanese commentator Paul Salem (1998) noted, “Never has one individual wielded such a combination of public and private power in modern Lebanon as has Rafiq Hariri” (13). Hariri’s role in the reconstruction of Beirut, with American-Saudi backing and Syrian acquiesce, was an important component of the accumulation of this unprecedented social power in Lebanon.

This set of reconstruction plans included the 1983 and 1986 plans by Dar al-Handassah (DAR), commissioned through Hariri’s corporation Oger Liban and funded by Hariri directly. Hariri first established his presence in the country through the involvement in the

reconstruction of urban fabric, by utilising his corporation to undertake rubble removal and provide funding for rebuilding damaged buildings. The reconstruction was a geopolitical and ideological project, as much as it was an urban development one.

Prominent figures in Lebanon have accused Oger Liban of destroying many significant buildings in the downtown area (including Souk al-Nouriye, Souk Sursok and parts of Saifi) during its “clear up” operation (Makdisi 1997, 667; Makarem 2014, 180; Salam 1994). It is important to note that it was during the “peaceful” years of 1983 and then again in 1992 before the official inauguration of Solidere, as the Lebanese architect Assem Salam (1994) has shown, that the most extensive demolition of the downtown area occurred.

However, Hariri’s efforts to reinvent the downtown Beirut, in 1983, were soon brought to a halt. By the end of 1983 the Civil War had flared up once again. Incidents included the infamous bombing of the US Embassy and the US Marine headquarters, as well as the assassination of the President of the American University of Beirut (AUB). Fighting also broke out in the Mountain War (*harb al-jabal*) in 1984. Plans for the reconstruction were once again shelved. But the return of fighting resulted in Hariri entering political life in Lebanon more forcefully. It also marked a turning point in the plans for the downtown area.

Charbel Nahas, who worked as the Head of the General Studies Department at Oger Liban in this period, argues that the renewed conflict created a different logic in people’s relation to the city.<sup>9</sup> In the opening phases of the war, people sought to return to their downtown properties as soon as possible. By 1984, a different logic emerged. “In 1983-84 it was absolutely different, no one was in the mind of coming back—on the contrary—because alternative new centers had developed in the west, east etc...”, Nahas said. Many in Lebanon perceived that a different scale and program was required for the reconstruction of the downtown area: “a much more ambitious approach needed to be put in place to justify the re-centralisation of the city”.

Working at Oger Liban, Nahas and his colleagues discussed the reconstruction in Europe after World War II with Hariri and the broad legal set up of the operation: “And we [Nahas and Hariri] diverged very seriously. He had at the time the idea of having a private development area, while the previous proposals of a series of real estate companies [developed in the 1977 plan] ... were not supposed to be operational but were supposed to [facilitate] the distribution of land rents... it was not supposed to be a private development in anyway”. It was during this period that downtown would transform into the upmarket, private development and joint-stock

<sup>9</sup> Nahas, Charbel. Recorded interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. 18 July, 2016.

corporation that we are familiar with. The previous attempts for reconstruction that sought to wrestle power away from certain groups were built upon and expanded.

### **3.3 The Solidere plans, 1991**

The third set of plans for downtown Beirut, which would result in the establishment of the joint-stock corporation Solidere in 1994, came soon after the “War of Liberation” ended. As soon as the fighting halted, Hariri led a rapid political, legal and economic mobilisation under the premise of urban reconstruction. Between 1991 and 1994, a heated public debate concentrated on the plans proposed for Beirut and the scheme to turn the entire BCD into a real estate corporation. Following the signing of the Ta’if Accord and the eventual cessation of the conflict, Hariri took full charge of the rearrangement of social life in Lebanon through the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. The CDR appointed the engineering firm Dar al-Handassah (DAR) to create a new plan for the redevelopment of downtown Beirut. In the summer of 1991, the prominent Lebanese architect Henri Eddé designed a new master plan, financed by Hariri, and launched by DAR. The proposal became known as the Eddé Plan. Alongside the master plan, the CDR agreed to a new US\$6.9 million study for Lebanon, funded by the Hariri Foundation, and created by the American engineering firm Bechtel in partnership with DAR (Kabanni 1991). This plan culminated in the document *Horizon 2000 for the Reconstruction and Development of Lebanon*, which envisaged a US\$12 billion national reconstruction with the future proposal of Solidere at its centre.

The Eddé Plan was influenced by the APUR plan and expanded many of the power grabs that it sought to put in place, such as extending the powers and role of the CDR even further and deepening the corporate takeover of the BCD. The Eddé plan created a spectacular new vision for the downtown area. The Eddé master plan envisaged a mixed-use city centre including commercial, residential, governmental, tourist and cultural buildings alongside and the implementation of modern infrastructure. The city centre was to be rebuilt around three major North-South axes, the most prominent of which was a boulevard 10 metres wider than the Champ-Élysée. Most buildings would be 10-20 stories high, and the centrepiece was to be a 40-storey World Trade Center. In the Normandy Bay area, the plan envisaged an artificial island with bridges that would connect it to the rest of downtown in the style of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.

The master plan stated that because of the increased destruction since the creation of the APUR plan inevitably the zone imagined for real estate corporations would be expanded to all

rights holders. In parallel to the Édde plan, parliament passed Law 117 in 1991 under controversial circumstances—there were widespread allegations of MPs taking bribes—that provided legal framework for a real estate company to be involved in the reconstruction of the BCD area. Law No.117/91 was an amendment to Law Decree no.5 established in January 31, 1977, which created the CDR. This law stipulated that stocks were to be granted as compensation to the original property owners (for a full account of Law 117, see Leenders 2004).<sup>10</sup>

Soon after the passing of Law 117/91, further demolition of the BCD occurred, even though, as Makdisi (1997) notes, the reconstruction plan had yet to be approved or defined: “Not only were buildings that could have been repaired brought down with high-explosive demolition charges, but the explosives used in each instance were far in excess of what was needed for the job, thereby causing enough damage to neighboring structures to require their demolition as well” (672).

Many people mobilised against the plans for the BCD in Beirut. They included tenants and apartment owners, competing political factions, numerous funding agencies, urban planners and architects, the intelligentsia, political and religious leaders, displaced groups and semi-governmental institutions. Scholars and urbanists heavily criticised the Eddé Plan (Beyhum et al. 1995; Gavin and Maluf 1996; Kabbani 1991; Khalaf and Khoury 1993; Salam 1994). Saree Makdisi (1997) noted that the 1991 plan was “...unanimously denounced as an outrageous rebuilding project to follow the virtually total demolition of whatever structures remained in the city centre” (672).

Much of the scholarship and broader criticism around the plan focused on the proposal for a single real estate corporation and the conflict of interest it produced between the public and private sectors (Kabbani 1991). However, there was also significant support for this master plan throughout Lebanon. Supporters argued that a single private company was the only viable option in the context of a fractured government, wide-spread distrust of the public-sector and inadequate public funds. Furthermore, supporters viewed the transfer of property rights from owners to the real estate company as the only way to reclaim properties from squatters and

<sup>10</sup> Law 117/91, dated December 7, 1991, is a general law that allowed the establishment of a single real estate corporation in the BCD. It was applicable to the development of any and all areas damaged by war and was applied to the BCD immediately after the Civil War. This law exempted the company from registration and stamp duties, income and capital gains tax for the first 10 years of incorporation, and stipulated that the company was tasked with financing and ensuring the construction of infrastructure on behalf of, and at the expense of, the state, on the basis of a contract between the CDR and the real estate company.

initiate the reconstruction of the downtown area that was estimated to have some 250,000 property-right claimants.

The controversy around Eddé Plan, however, caused enough public opposition for it to be revised. Henri Eddé (1997) resigned over what he stated was his naivety regarding Hariri's intentions and his own wish to protect his client, "*qui était l'Etat*" [that is the state] (126). A new master plan for BCD was formulated under the auspices of Angus Gavin, formerly of DAR and the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), and the French urbanist Jean-Paul Lebas, who had worked on the La Defense Project. Gavin and Lebas's new master plan for downtown Beirut consciously bolstered "the historical fabric of the city" and drew explicitly from the urban design movement of New Urbanism and Kevin Lynch's (1960) *The Image of the City* (Gavin and Maluf 1996). But while the physical form of the reconstruction may have been adapted to respond to certain critiques many of the original buildings had already been torn down as part of the "reconstruction", as detailed above, while the economic model underlying the reconstruction was not. Najib Hourani argues that rather than adjust to the criticisms of the concerns over the finalisation of the BCD, the new plan "deepened rather than tempered, the commodification of space in the Beirut city center" (Hourani 2010, 290).

The formation of the Solidere-led reconstruction and with it the Second Lebanese Republic was also a directly violent process. Saree Makdisi (1997) details how the election of Hariri in 1992 was followed by the strengthening of the "repressive apparatuses of the state" (697). Old censorship laws previously ignored were now enforced; the death penalty was brought back for political and civil crimes; and there were widespread allegations of torture and abuse of prisoners in Lebanese jails; and in 1993, a ban was placed on street protests of any kind. In 1996, a military curfew was introduced in Beirut and other cities to prevent strikes planned by the General Labour Confederation. Lebanon under Hariri, Makdisi (1997) argues, "witnessed both an astonishing increase in the activities of repressive state apparatuses as well as an increase in the state's role in those forms of public planning that—as opposed to health care, education, and low-income housing—are calculated either to yield immediate private profits or to improve the infrastructural conditions for the generation of private profits" (290).

Solidere was also directly associated with violence. Bahij Tabbara, who created the legal framework for Solidere, stressed that the real estate corporation was not an ordinary business, "the concept was to force the tenants and land owners to form a stock exchange company against the value of their share, it was a kind of expropriation but it was not a real expropriation.

The tenants were forced into a company”.<sup>11</sup> Many of the property right holders supported the creation of Solidere, as property rights over the years had become fragmented into thousands of different claims. Many other property owners did not agree with the formation of Solidere and were often violently dispossessed of their claims.

The Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District formed and campaigned against the actions of Solidere. The preparation for the creation of Solidere resulted in the large-scale destruction of much of the BCD, more than as the result of the targeting through active conflict between militias. In 1996, a building in Wadi Abu Jamil (plot 999 Mina el Hosn) collapsed, killing 15 people who were squatting in the building and seriously injuring eight others. At the time, much of the media accused Solidere of weakening the foundations of the building but no one was prosecuted. Makdisi (1997) notes that, when a family of fifteen squatters was killed inside a building, “many people’s worst fears were confirmed: there would literally be no space in the revitalised and gentrified cosmopolitan city centre for such destitute and ‘undesirable’ migrants” (697).

From the time the Solidere was formed, and the broader reconstruction in Lebanon organised around it, the initiative continued to be a source of intense tension within the country. As Najib Hourani (2011) has argued that Solidere is one example of “illiberal and anti-cosmopolitan forces”, which illustrates how the reconstruction process has been utilised by Lebanese elites “to turn reconstruction into the reproduction of their own nation-fragmenting power” (290). As many people in Beirut lament, there has not been any space for the Lebanese themselves in the newly constructed downtown area.

<sup>11</sup> Tabbara, Bahij. Former Minister of Justice and Hariri’s private lawyer. Note based interview with author. Beirut, Lebanon. February 6, 2018.



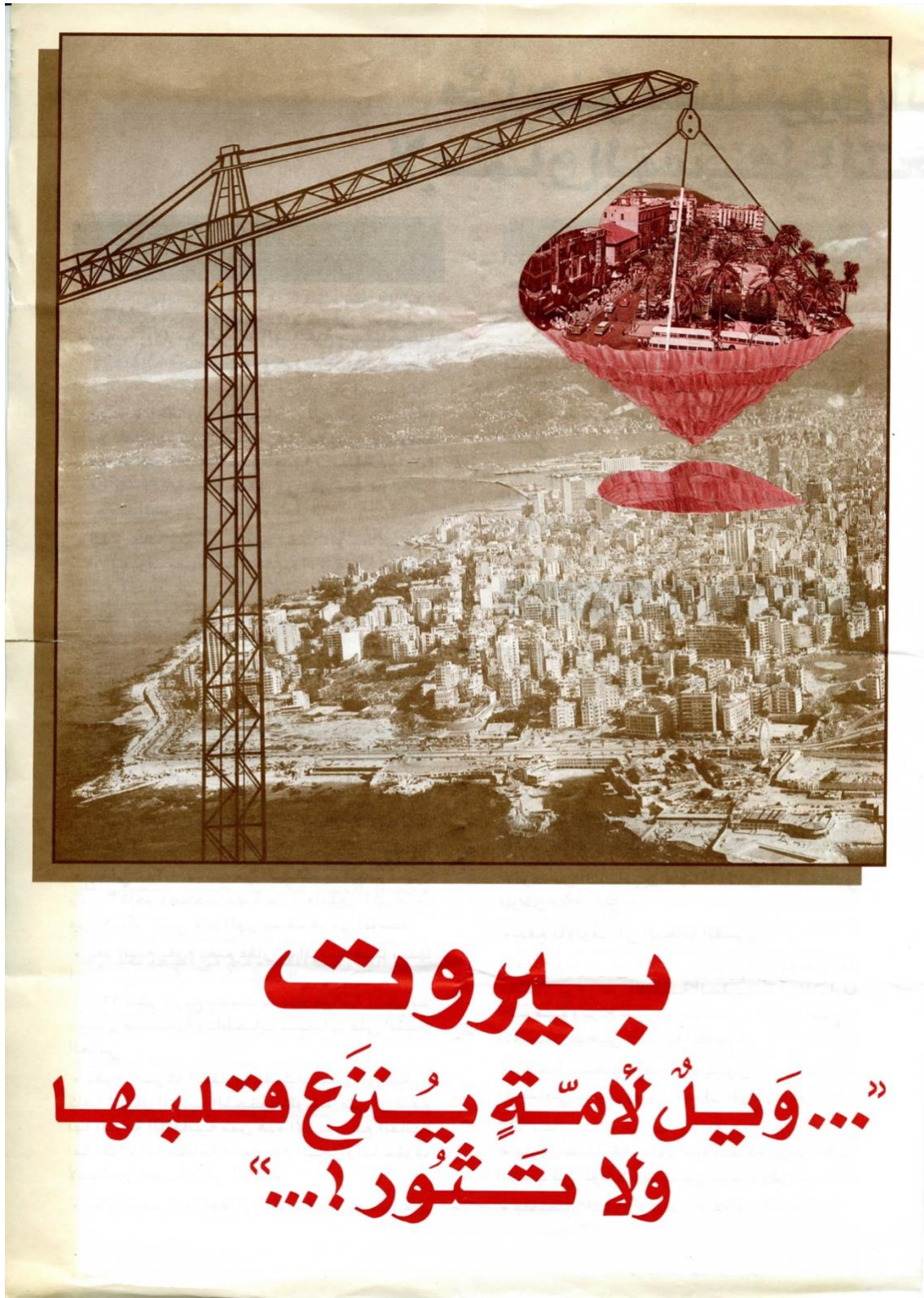


Figure 3: A poster by the Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District that reads “Woe to a nation that rips out its heart and does not revolt!” Circa 1993. Source: Archives of The Arab Center for Architecture (ACA). Copyright: The Association of Owners Rights in the Beirut Central District.

## 4. Conclusion

The reconstruction in Lebanon was never aimed at rebuilding a social contract or establishing a post-conflict era; rather it was part of an accumulation of social power by one faction over others. It is through this framework that we can understand how this reconstruction process has been, and continues to be, the site of such consternation within Lebanon. In the current period of revolt and economic collapse in Lebanon, protesters have focused in particular on the violence and dispossession that the Solidere-led reconstruction project has entailed. Indeed, the focus by protesters has caused a number of reassessments of the reconstruction in international and national media. *The Economist* (2019) reported that nearly twenty-five years from the start of the reconstruction, “few projects arouse Lebanese passions as much as the rebuilding of Beirut”. While the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, an outlet with a well-known opposition to Hariri and his project, in turn published a 2019 story that led with the headline “Solidere: Here money was looted” (Wahab 2019).

Reconstruction, therefore, in the case of Lebanon has demonstrated to be not the mark of a post-war era. It too being part of conflict by competing groups and result in socio-political and economic violence against civilian populations. The lesson to be learned from the Lebanese reconstruction is that rebuilding can play a central role in sustaining conflict situations rather than creating new social contracts that would work toward creating circumstances supporting peace and social harmony. The built environment can be weaponised. Infrastructures, walls and buildings can all be constructed through, encircle, exclude and/or divide, communities. But also financial mechanisms can be established to siphon off rents to cliques at the cost of the broader civilian population. The construction and organisation of the built environment can be as violent as the dramatic instances of the destruction of the urban fabric.

A renewed assessment of the Solidere-led national reconstruction process is not only warranted due to the current intensification of the social crisis and the continued debates over it within Lebanon but also the conflicts occurring across the region. In Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Gaza (Palestine) large-scale reconstruction projects are planned or underway. How violence and conflict can be embedded in the processes of urbanisation, and in particular reconstruction, has in a regional context never been more vital to understand. Moreover, as has been witnessed explicitly in the case of the debate over the reconstruction of Syria, Solidere has been utilised as an explicit model for the rebuilding. There is still much work to be done to build our conceptual understanding of violence and conflict in relation to the built environment.

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